

ANARCHISM and VIOLENCE

Front cover picture by Clifford Harper



by Errico Malatesta

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error and wickedness, we lose any moral influence over them and abandon them to their blind impulses. If instead, we pay homage to their goodness, their courage and sense of sacrifice, we can reach their minds through their hearts and ensure that those valuable storehouses of energy shall be used in an intelligent and good, as well as useful, way in the interests of the [common] cause.⁶

ANARCHISM and VIOLENCE

by Errico Malatesta



6. *Umanità Nova*, December 24, 1921

★ Anarchism and Violence

Anarchists are opposed to every kind of violence; everyone knows that. The main plank of Anarchism is the removal of violence from human relations. It is life based on the freedom of the individual, without the intervention of the *gendarme*. For this reason we are enemies of capitalism which depends on the protection of the *gendarme* to oblige workers to allow themselves to be exploited - or even to remain idle and go hungry when it is not in the interest of the bosses to exploit them. We are therefore enemies of the State, which is the coercive, violent organisation of society.

But if a man of honour declares that he believes it stupid and barbarous to argue with a stick in his hand; that it is unjust and evil to oblige a person to obey the will of another at pistol point, is it, perhaps, reasonable to deduce that that gentleman intends to allow himself to be beaten up and be made to submit to the will of another without having recourse to more extreme means for his defence?

Violence is justifiable only when it is necessary to defend oneself and others from violence. It is where necessity ceases that crime begins...

The slave is always in a state of legitimate defence and consequently, his violence against the boss, against the oppressor, is always morally justifiable, and must be controlled only by such considerations as that the best and most economical use is being made of human effort and human sufferings.¹

There are certain other men, other parties and schools of thought which are sincerely motivated by the general good as are the best among us. But what distinguishes the Anarchists from all the others is in fact their horror of violence from human relations... But why, then, it may be asked, have Anarchists in the present struggle [against Fascism] advocated and used violence when it is in contradiction with their declared ends? So much so that many critics, some in good faith, and all who are in bad faith, have come to believe that the distinguishing characteristic of Anarchism is, in fact, violence. The question may seem embarrassing, but it can be answered in a few words. For two people to live in peace they must both want peace; if one insists on using force to oblige the other to work for him and serve him, then the other, if he wishes to retain his dignity as a man and not be reduced to abject slavery, will be obliged in spite of his love of peace, to resist force with adequate

... I said that those assassins are *also* saints and heroes; and those of my friends who protest against my statement do so in homage to those whom they call the real saints and heroes, who, it would seem, never make mistakes.

I can do no more than confirm what I said. When I think of all that I have learned about Mariani and Aguggini; when I think what good sons and brothers they were, and what affectionate and devoted comrades they were in everyday life, always ready to take risks and to make sacrifices when there was urgent need, I bemoan their fate, I bemoan the destiny that has turned those fine and noble beings into assassins.

I said that one day they will be praised - I did not say that I would praise them; and they will be praised because, as has happened with so many others, the brutal action, the passion that misled them will be forgotten, and only the idea which inspired them and the martyrdom that made them sacrosanct will be remembered.

I don't want to get involved in historical examples; but I could if I wished find in the history of all conspiracies and revolutions, in that of the Italian Risorgimento as well as in our own, a thousand examples of men who have committed actions as bad and as stupid as that of the Diana and yet who are praised by their respective parties, because in fact one forgets the action and remembers the intention, and the individual becomes a symbol and the event is transformed into a legend.

Yes, there are saints and heroes who are assassins; there are assassins who are saints and heroes.

The human mind is really most complicated, and there is a disequilibrium between what one calls heart and what is called brain, between affective qualities and the intellectual faculties, which produces the most unpredictable results and makes possible the most striking contradictions in human behaviour. The war volunteer inebriated by patriotic propaganda, convinced of serving the cause of justice and civilisation, and prepared for the supreme sacrifice, who raged against the 'enemy' - Italian against Austrian, or vice versa - and died in the act of killing, was undoubtedly a hero, but a hero who was unconsciously an assassin.

Torquemada who tortured others as well as himself to serve God and to save souls, was both a saint and an assassin...

It could easily be argued that the saint and the hero are almost always unbalanced individuals. But then everything would be reduced to a question of words, to a question of definition. What is a saint? What is a hero?

Enough of hair-splitting.

What is important is to avoid confusing the act with the intentions, and in condemning the bad actions not to overlook doing justice to the good intentions. And not only on the grounds of respect for the truth, or human pity, but also for reasons of propaganda, for the practical repercussions that our judgement may have.

There are, and, so long as present conditions and the environment of violence in which we live last, there will always be generous men, who are rebellious and over-sensitive, but who lack sufficient powers of reflection and who in certain situations allow themselves to be carried away by passion and strike out blindly. If we do not openly recognise the goodness of their intentions, if we do not distinguish between

1. *Umanità Nova*, August 25, 1921

It is true that if one takes into consideration such factors as heredity, education and social background, the personal responsibility of those in power is much reduced and perhaps even nonexistent. But then if the king is not responsible for his commissions and omissions; if in spite of the oppression, the dispossession, and the massacre of the people carried out in his name, he should have continued to occupy the highest place in the country, why ever then should Bresci have to pay with a life of indescribable suffering, for an act which, however mistaken some may judge it, no one can deny was inspired by altruistic intentions?

But this business of seeking to place the responsibility where it belongs is only of secondary interest to us.

We do not believe in the right to punish; we reject the idea of revenge as a barbarous sentiment. We have no intention of being either executioners or avengers. It seems to us that the role of liberators and peacemakers is more noble and positive. To kings, oppressors and exploiters we would willingly extend our hand, if only they wished to become men among other men, equals among equals. But so long as they insist on profiting from the situation as it exists and to defend it with force, thus causing the martyrdom, the wretchedness and the death through hardships of millions of human beings, we are obliged, we have a duty to oppose force with force...

We know that these attentats, with the people insufficiently prepared for them, are sterile and often, by provoking reactions that one is unable to control, produce much sorrow, and harm the very cause they were intended to serve.

We know that what is essential and undoubtedly useful is not just to kill a king, the man, but to kill all kings - those of the Courts, of parliaments and of the factories - in the hearts and minds of the people; that is, to uproot faith in the principle of authority to which most people owe allegiance.⁴

I do not need to repeat my disapproval and horror for attentats such as that of the *Diana*, which besides being bad in themselves are also stupid, because they inevitably harm the cause they would wish to serve. And I have never failed to protest strongly; whenever similar acts have taken place and especially when it has turned out that they have been committed by authentic anarchists. I have protested when it would have been better for me to remain silent, because my protest was inspired by superior reasons of principles and tactics, and because I had a duty to do so, since there are people gifted with little personal critical sense, who allow themselves to be guided by what I say. But now it is not a case of judging the fact, and discussing whether it was a good or bad thing to have done, or whether similar actions should or should not have been repeated. Now it is a question of judging men threatened with a punishment a thousand times worse than the death penalty; and so one must examine who these men are, what were their intentions and the circumstances in which they acted.⁵

4. 'Causa ed Effeti', September 22, 1900

5. *Umanità Nova*, December 18, 1921

means.²

The struggle against government is, in the last analysis, physical, material.

Governments make the law. They must therefore dispose of the material forces (police and army) to impose the law, for otherwise only those who wanted to would obey it, and it would no longer be the law, but a simple series of suggestions which all would be free to accept or reject. Governments have this power, however, and use it through the law, to strengthen their power, however, as well as to serve the interests of the ruling classes, by oppressing and exploiting the workers.

The only limit to the oppression of government is the power with which the people show themselves capable of opposing it.

Conflict may be open or latent; but it always exists since the government does not pay attention to discontent and popular resistance except when it is faced with the danger of insurrection.

When the people meekly submit to the law, or their protests are feeble and confined to words, the government studies its own interests and ignores the needs of the people; when the protests are lively, insistent, threatening, the government, depending on whether it is more or less understanding, gives way or resorts to repression. But one always comes back to insurrection, for if the government does not give way, the people will end by rebelling; and if the government does give way, then the people gain confidence in themselves and make ever increasing demands, until such time as the incompatibility between freedom and authority becomes clear and the violent struggle is engaged.

It is therefore necessary to be prepared, morally and materially, so that when this does happen the people will emerge victorious.³

This revolution must of necessity be violent, even though violence is in itself an evil. It must be violent because a transitional, revolutionary, violence, is the only way to put and end to the far greater, and permanent, violence which keeps the majority of mankind in servitude.⁴

The Bourgeoisie [the Upper Middle Class - the capitalist class] will never allow itself to be expropriated without a struggle, and one will always have to resort to the *coup de force*, to the violation of legal order by illegal means.⁵

We too are deeply unhappy at this need for violent struggle. We who preach love, and who struggle to achieve a state of society in which agreement and love are possible among men, suffer more than anybody by the necessity with which we are confronted of having to defend ourselves with violence against the violence of the ruling classes. However, to renounce a liberating violence, when it is the only way

2. *Pensiero e Volontà*, September 1, 1924

3. *Programma Anarchico*, Bologna, July 1920

4. *Umanità Nova*, August 12, 1920

5. *Umanità Nova*, September 9, 1921

to end the daily sufferings and the savage carnage which afflict mankind, would be to connive at the class antagonisms we deplore and at the evils which arise from them.⁶

We neither impose anything by force nor do we wish to submit to a violent imposition.

We intend to use force against government, because it is by force that we are kept in subjugation by government.

We intend to expropriate the owners of property because it is by force that they withhold the raw materials and wealth, which is the fruit of human labour, and use it to oblige others to work in their interest.

We shall resist with force whoever would wish by force, to retain or regain the means to impose his will and exploit the labour of others.

We would resist any force any 'dictatorship' or 'constituent' [Communist or Fascist] that attempted to impose itself on the masses in revolt. And we will fight the republic as we fight the monarchy, if by republic is meant government, however it may come to power, which makes laws and disposes of military and penal powers to oblige the people to obey.

With the exception of these cases, in which the use of force is justified as a defence against force, we are always against violence, and for self-determination.⁷

I have repeated a thousand times that I believe that not to 'actively' resist evil, adequately and by every possible way is, in theory absurd, because it is in contradiction with the aim of avoiding and destroying evil, and in practice immoral because it is a denial of human solidarity and the duty that stems from it to defend the weak and the oppressed. I think that a regime which is born of violence and which continues to exist by violence cannot be overthrown except by a corresponding and proportionate violence, and that one is therefore either stupid or deceived in relying on legality where the oppressors can change the law to suit their own ends. But I believe that violence is, for us who aim at peace among men, and justice and freedom for all, an unpleasant necessity, which must cease the moment liberation is achieved - that is, at the point where defence and security are no longer threatened - or become a crime against humanity, and the harbinger of new oppression and injustice.⁸

We are on principle opposed to violence and for this reason wish that the social struggle should be conducted as humanely as possible. But this does not mean that we would wish it to be less determined, less thoroughgoing; indeed we are of the opinion that in the long run half measures only indefinitely prolong the struggle, neutralizing it as well as encouraging more of the kind of violence which one wishes to avoid. Neither does it mean that we limit the right of self-defence to resistance

6. *Umanità Nova*, April 27, 1920

7. *Umanità Nova*, May 9, 1920

8. *Pensiero e Volontà*, April 16, 1925

'model republic'; McKinley who incarnated the militaristic, expansionist and imperialist policies on which the fat American bourgeoisie have embarked, has fallen foul of an anarchist's revolver.

If we feel at all distressed it is for the fate in store for the generous-hearted man, who opportunely or inopportunely, for good or tactically bad reasons, gave himself in wholesale sacrifice to the cause of equality and liberty ...

[It might be argued by those who have condemned Czolgosz's act] that the workers' cause and that of the revolution have not been advanced; that McKinley is succeeded by his equal, Roosevelt, and everything remains unchanged except that the situation for anarchists has become a little more difficult than before. And they may be right; indeed, from what I know of the American scene, this will most likely be the case.

What it means is that [as] in war there are brilliant as well as false moves, there are cautious combatants as well as others who are easily carried away by enthusiasm and allow themselves to be an easy target for the enemy, and may even compromise the position of their comrades. This means that each one must advise, defend and practise the methods which he thinks most suitable to achieve victory in the shortest time and with the least sacrifice possible; but it does not alter the fundamental and obvious fact that he who struggles, well or badly, against the common enemy and towards the same goals as us, is our friend and has a right to expect our warm sympathy even if we cannot accord him our unconditional approval.

Whether the fighting unit is a collectivity or a single individual cannot change the moral aspect of the problem. An armed insurrection carried out inopportunely can produce real or apparent harm to the social war we are fighting, just as an individual attentat which antagonises popular feeling; but if the insurrection was made to conquer freedom, no one will dare deny the socio-political characteristics of the defeated insurrectionists. Why should it be any different when the insurrectionist is a single individual? ...

It is not a question of discussing tactics. If it were, I would say that in general I prefer collective action to individual action, also because collective action demands qualities which are fairly common and makes the allocation of tasks more or less possible, whereas one cannot count on heroism, which is exceptional and by its nature sporadic, calling for individual sacrifice. The problem here is of a higher order; it is a question of the revolutionary spirit, of that almost instinctive feeling of hatred of oppression, without which programmes remain dead letters however libertarian are the proposals they embody; it is a question of that combative spirit, without which even anarchists become domesticated and end up, by one road or another, in the slough of legalitarianism ...³

Gaetano Bresci, worker and anarchist, has killed Humbert, king. Two men: one dead prematurely, the other condemned to a life of torment, which is a thousand times worse than death! Two families plunged into sadness!

Whose fault is it? ...

3. *l'Agitazione*, September 22, 1901

★ Attentats

I remember that on the occasion of a much-publicised anarchist *attentat* a socialist of the first rank just back from fighting in the Greco-Turkish war shouted from the housetops with the approval of his comrades, that human life is always sacred and must not be threatened, not even in the cause of freedom. It appeared that he excepted the lives of Turks and the cause of Greek independence. Illogicality, or hypocrisy?¹

Anarchist violence is the only violence that is justifiable, which is not criminal. I am of course speaking of violence which has truly anarchist characteristics, and not of this or that case of blind and unreasoning violence which has been attributed to anarchists, or which perhaps has been committed by real anarchists driven to fury by abominable persecutions, or blinded by over-sensitiveness, uncontrolled by reason, at the sight of social injustices, of suffering for the sufferings of others.

Real anarchist violence is that which ceases when the necessity of defence and liberation ends. It is tempered by the awareness that individuals in isolation are hardly, if at all, responsible for the position they occupy through heredity and environment; real anarchist violence is not motivated by hatred but by love; and noble because it aims at the liberation of all and not at the substitution of one's own domination for that of others.

There is a political party in Italy that, aiming at highly civilised ends, set itself the task of extinguishing all confidence in violence among the masses... and has succeeded in rendering them incapable of any resistance against the rise of fascism. It seemed to me that Turati himself more or less clearly recognised and lamented the fact in his speech in Paris commemorating Jaurès.

The anarchists are without hypocrisy. Force must be resisted by force: today against the oppression of today; tomorrow against those who might replace that of today.²

McKinley, head of North American oligarchy, the instrument and defender of the capitalist giants, the betrayer of the Cubans and the Philipinos, the man who authorised the massacre of the strikers of Hazelton, the torturer of the workers in the

against actual or imminent attack. For us the oppressed are always in a state of legitimate defence and are fully justified in rising without waiting to be actually fired on; and we are fully aware of the fact that attack is often the best means of defence...

Revenge, persistent hatred, cruelty to the vanquished when they have been overcome, are understandable reactions and can even be forgiven, in the heat of the struggle, in those whose dignity has been cruelly offended, and whose most intimate feelings have been outraged. But to condone ferocious anti-human feelings and raise them to the level of a principle, advocating them as a tactic for a movement [as the Fascists do], is both evil and counter-revolutionary.

For us revolution must not mean the substitution of one oppressor for another, of our domination for that of others. We want the material and spiritual elevation of man; the disappearance of every distinction between vanquished and conquerors; sincere brotherhood among all mankind - without which history would continue, as in the past, to be an alternation between oppression and rebellion, at the expense of real progress, and in the long term to the disadvantage of everybody, the conquerors no less than the vanquished.⁹

It is abundantly clear that violence is needed to resist the violence of the adversary, and we must advocate and prepare it, if we do not wish the present situation of slavery in disguise, in which most humanity finds itself, to continue and worsen. But violence contains within itself the danger of transforming the revolution into a brutal struggle without the light of an ideal and without possibilities of a beneficial outcome; and for this reason one must stress the moral aims of the movement, and the need, and the duty, to contain violence within the limits of strict necessity.

We do not say that violence is good when we use it and harmful when others use it against us. We say that violence is justifiable, good and 'moral' as well as a duty when it is used in one's own defence and that of others, against the demands of those who believe in violence; it is an evil and 'immoral' if it serves to violate the freedom of others...

We are not 'pacifists' because peace is not possible unless it is desired by both sides.

We consider violence a necessity and a duty for defence, but only for defence. And we mean not only for defence against direct, sudden, physical attack, but against all those institutions that use force to keep people in a state of servitude.

We are against Fascism and we would wish that it were weakened by opposing to its violence a greater violence. And we are, above all, against government, which is permanent violence.¹⁰

To my mind if violence is justifiable even beyond the needs of self-defence, then it is justified when it is used against us, and we would have no grounds for protest.¹¹

1. *Pensiero e Volantà*, September 1, 1924

2. *Pensiero e Volantà*, September 1, 1924

9. *Fede!*, October 28, 1923

10. *Umanità Nova*, October 21, 1922

11. *Il Risveglio*, December 20, 1922

To the alleged incapacity of the people we do not offer a solution by putting ourselves in the place of our former oppressors [like the Communists and Socialists]. Only freedom or the struggle for freedom can be the school for freedom.

But, you say, to start a revolution and bring it to its conclusion one needs a force which is also armed. And who denies this? But the armed force, or rather the numerous armed revolutionary groups, will be performing a revolutionary task if they serve to free the people and prevent the re-emergence of an authoritarian government. But they will be tools of reaction and destroy their own achievements if they are prepared to be used to impose a particular kind of social organisation or the program of a particular party...¹²

Revolution being, by the necessity of things, violent action, tends to develop, rather than remove, the spirit of violence. But the revolution as conceived by the Anarchists is the least violent of all and seeks to halt all violence as soon as the need to use force to oppose that of the government and the Bourgeoisie ceases.

Anarchists recognize violence only as a means of legitimate defence; and if today they are in favour of violence it is because they maintain that slaves are always in a state of legitimate defence. But the Anarchist ideal is for a society in which the factor of violence has been eliminated, and their ideal serves to restrain, correct and destroy the spirit of revenge which revolution, as a physical act, would tend to develop.

In any case, the remedy would never be the organisation and consolidation of violence in the hands of a government or dictatorship, which cannot be founded on anything but brute force and recognition for the authority of police - and military - forces.¹³

... An error, the opposite of the one that the terrorists make, threatens the anarchist movement. Partly as a reaction to the abuse of violence during recent years, partly as a result of the survival of christian ideas, and above all, as a result of the mystical preaching's of Tolstoy, which owe their popularity and prestige to the genius and high moral qualities of their author, Anarchists are beginning to pay serious attention to the party of passive resistance, whose basic principle is that the individual must allow himself and others to be persecuted and despised rather than harm the aggressor. It is what has been called *passive anarchy*.

Since there are some, upset by my aversion to useless and harmful violence, who have been suggesting that I display Tolstoyanist tendencies, I take the opportunity to declare that, in my opinion, this doctrine however sublimely altruistic it may appear to be, is, in fact the negation of instinct and social duties. A man may, if he is a very good ... christian, suffer every kind of provocation without defending himself with every weapon at his disposal, and still remain a moral man. But would he not, in practice, even unconsciously, be a supreme egoist were he to allow others to be persecuted without making any effort to defend them? If, for instance, he were to

prefer that a class should be reduced to abject misery, that a people should be down-trodden by an invader, that man's life or liberty should be abused, rather than bruise the flesh of the oppressor?

There can be cases where passive resistance is an effective weapon, and it would then obviously be the best of weapons, since it would be the most economic in human suffering. But more often than not, to profess passive resistance only serves to reassure the oppressors against their fears of rebellion, and thus it betrays the cause of the oppressed.

It is interesting to observe how both the *terrorists* and the *tolstoyans*, just because both are mystics, arrive at practical results that are more or less similar. The former would not hesitate to destroy half of mankind so long as the idea triumphed; the latter would be prepared to let all mankind remain under the yoke of great suffering rather than violate a principle.

For myself, I would violate every principle in the world in order to save a man: which would in fact be a question of respecting principle, since, in my opinion, all moral and sociological principles are reduced to this one principle: the good of mankind, the good of all mankind.¹⁴

12. *Fede!*, November 25, 1923

13. *Umanità Nova*, July 18, 1920

14. *Anarchia* (Numero Unico), August 1896